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PATTERN OF CONFERENCES

Usefulness and feasibility of installing an appropriate signalling system whenever a speech time-limit is established in accordance with rule 72 of the rules of procedure

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In paragraph 21 of its resolution 46/190 of 20 December 1991, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General, in the context of the systematic and progressive replacement and upgrading of the equipment in the conference rooms, to make proposals to the Assembly at its forty-seventh session, taking advantage of the experience gained by other organizations of the United Nations system, on the usefulness and feasibility of installing an appropriate signalling system to enable systematically each speaker, as well as the Chairman and participants, whenever a speech time-limit is established in accordance with rule 72 of the rules of procedure of the Assembly, to monitor the time left before actually breaking the time-limit.

2. The present report has been prepared in response to that request. It details the experience gained in the use of signalling devices by other organizations of the United Nations system and provides information on the feasibility of relevant signalling systems, inter alia, technical specifications of the devices and the costing involved to install them at headquarters locations, including regional commissions, that is, New York, Geneva, Vienna, Santiago, Nairobi, Addis Ababa and Bangkok, and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). 1/ However, costing is, pro forma, based on New York.

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II. EXPERIENCE GAINED BY OTHER ORGANIZATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

3. Signalling systems have already been installed in several organizations of the United Nations system. For example, in May 1967, the Twentieth World Health Assembly of the World Health Organization (WHO) decided that representatives taking part in the general discussion in plenary meetings on the reports of the Executive Board and the Director-General should be encouraged to limit their speeches to 10 minutes. To that end, a signalling system, which is still in use, was designed and built in the WHO workshops, and installed in the Assembly Hall of the Palais des Nations.

4. Practical criteria were applied in the manufacture of the system, which consists of a green light that flashes to amber at the ninth minute and turns to red at the tenth minute. It is controlled through double commands placed on either side of the rostrum, at seats occupied, respectively, by the conference and protocol officers. Pilot lamps are placed on the President's desk and on the lectern for the guidance of the President and the speaker, and a much larger version is placed on the rostrum, to be seen by the entire audience. The device is turned on and off manually. Although it is somewhat primitive, this system has worked to the satisfaction of the Organization over the years.

5. A signalling system is also used during the general debate in the General Conference at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to ensure compliance with the 20-minute time-limit per delegation. The equipment, installed in Meeting Room 1, was designed and manufactured by the UNESCO technical services. It is turned on and off manually by the Secretary of the meeting. Time remaining is indicated at five-minute intervals on displays in the hall and on the rostrum. One minute before the expiry of the time-limit, a flashing light appears, signalling to the speaker that his time is about to lapse.

6. The Commission on the Status of Women, with headquarters at Vienna, used a signalling device at its 1989 session that proved to be very useful. However, the system was not required at subsequent sessions, owing to fuller compliance with the time-limit.

7. A simple timing device has similarly been used by the Joint Development Committee of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In this case, the device is controlled by the Secretary of the Committee, who pre-sets the desired length of speeches, then turns the machine on at the beginning of each address. He alone can view the timer, which "counts down" until it reaches zero. At zero minus one minute, a green light six inches in height, located on the rostrum, turns yellow and at zero it turns red. The timer then "counts up" so that the Secretary and the Chairman can see the length of the overrun and intervene if necessary to suggest that a speaker should cut his speech short. The Secretary has to remember to cancel the timer immediately the speaker sits down, to reset it and to restart it for the next speech.

8. While the device described is useful to the Chairman, in its present form it does not give a sufficiently clear signal to the speaker, who cannot easily see the rather small light on the rostrum. The Development Committee has therefore requested the Fund's technical services to devise a system of lights that would flash at the speaker's place in the meeting room.

9. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) also uses a very simple signalling system in meetings of the Council Committees. In practice it serves as an indication of time, not as a means of enforcing a time-limit.

10. The system, which was donated to ICAO by a representative on the Council, consists of a small box with three lights, green, yellow and red, which go on after two minutes, two-and-a-half minutes and three minutes respectively. The box is placed in front of the Chairman and operated by the Secretary of the Committee. While the rear panel shows the time elapsed, only the lights are visible to the speaker. The system has some 20 different time-limit possibilities, ranging from one to 30 minutes.

III. SIGNALLING SYSTEM ALTERNATIVES

11. Three possible signalling systems have been identified for use at headquarters locations, including regional commissions. The first, involving a signal installed at each microphone position, is considered to be prohibitively expensive in view of the time, manpower and amount of cable required.

12. The second system is a wall-mounted device requiring hard wiring that would be permanently installed in each meeting room in which simultaneous interpretation is provided. It consists of a three-sided, solid state, tri-colour (green, red and amber), light-emitting display, with a matrix five inches in height that operates on 110 or 220 volts. The unit, which would be clearly visible up to around 100 feet, has a 60-minute maximum time pre-set capability. Time remaining would be displayed in green digital numerals; time expired would be displayed in red as "00", with the numerals illuminated for two thirds of a second, then turned off for one third of a second in a repeating, flashing mode. The timer cabinet would be constructed of wood, of a yet to be specified colour.

13. Moreover, a control console, installed at the Secretary's seat, would enable him to pre-set, start, stop and reset the mechanism as necessary. It consists of a small time display indicating the time on the large panel, and would be connected by a 10-metre cable. The control mechanism can operate on 110 or 220 volts, and includes a battery backup for short-term power failures. It would be constructed of black vinyl steel with wooden side plates.

14. The cost of such a system, including its design, manufacture and installation would be approximately $8,560 for the first unit, $2,710 for each of the additional 59 units and around $18,000 for wiring, or a total cost of around $186,450 for 60 units.

15. The third alternative involves the same three-sided display and control console as described above. However, the devices would be portable, making it possible to deploy them wherever and whenever necessary, thus representing substantial savings in terms of wiring, installation and the price of the units themselves.

16. The cost of such a system would be approximately $8,560 for the first unit and $2,840 for each of the additional 19 units, or a total cost of around $62,520 for 20 units.

IV. CONCLUSION

17. Information provided by several organizations of the United Nations system indicates that a signalling system can indeed be an effective way of monitoring the time left before actually breaking the time-limit. For the purposes of headquarters locations, including regional commissions, two such systems have been proposed, both of which involve the same device, namely, a three-sided display with green digital numerals indicating the time remaining and red flashing zeros indicating the expiry of the speaker's time. In the two cases, a control mechanism installed at the Secretary's seat would enable him to pre-set, start, stop and reset the mechanism. However, one system would be wall-mounted for permanent installation at a total cost of around $186,450 for 60 units, while the other would involve portable units at a total cost of around $62,520 for 20 units. In view of the considerable difference in costing, the portable system would appear to be the more desirable of the two.

Notes

1/ While the current temporary headquarters of ESCWA at Amman are not equipped for simultaneous interpretation, for costing purposes ESCWA was taken to have three conference rooms with such facilities.